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Big Cypress News Release

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CONSERVATION AGENCIES HEAR PINECREST PANTHER CONCERNS

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State and federal conservation officials met with Pinecrest area residents and other concerned individuals Saturday to discuss the presence of Florida panthers around residences and a conservation education center.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Park Service (NPS) became aware of the situation earlier this year when local residents reported sightings. Later the Miccosukee tribe said the panthers – at least one adult female and two kittens – have showed up in the area repeatedly since last fall, and the cats appear to have no natural fear of humans.

Since then, officials have radio-collared the cats and tracked their movements. The panthers favor the drier hammocks and pine islands in the area where deer and other prey animals congregate. The Pinecrest community is on one such chain of pine islands in the Big Cypress National Preserve. Although the cats have demonstrated no aggressive behavior toward humans, they have not fled from encounters with people.

Pinecrest residents told officials they enjoy seeing panthers in the area but fear for children since the three cats in their vicinity evidently have lost their fear of people.

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The three agencies have developed plans to alter the natural and man-made features that may be drawing panthers to Pinecrest. Meanwhile, officials called a meeting at the Pinecrest Ranger Station to gather public input and evaluate options for dealing with panthers already in the area.

Officials say human safety is the top priority, even when issues revolve around management of an endangered species like Florida panthers.

There are no known cases of panthers attacking humans in Florida. However, the presence of panthers that seem to have grown accustomed to being around humans is unusual enough to deserve attention, according to officials.

Officials tranquilized and vaccinated the cats recently and hope the experience will discourage the cats from interacting with people. If the panthers do return to the area, officials plan to chase them with dogs again to continue training the cats to avoid the Pinecrest area and to avoid people.

If the cats continue to frequent the area and continue not to demonstrate a fear of people, officials may capture and move them elsewhere in south Florida or possibly to a captive wildlife facility.

The three agencies have invited the Miccosukees to discuss the situation with them and to assist in monitoring the three cats' movements and behavior. The tribe has accepted the invitation, according to NPS.

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